

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY talks. I'm your host Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together we'll explore topics around HR, thought, leadership, compliance, and real life HR situations, we face every day. Joining me today is Steve Browne. He is the chief people officer at LaRosa's. He is a phenomenal speaker and an all around HR advocate. I have sat through many sessions of yours Steve. So thanks so much for jumping on the podcast today.

- Well, hi, Shari. It's great to be here. Thanks for having me. I should be the one who should say thank you.

- So we both were just at SHRM recently, and I've been doing a ton of thinking about where we're at, kind of right now, in the state of HR and would love to just get your perspective on, you know, what can we do now to be successful in HR? Because, I think things have changed so much over the last couple of years.

- We're kind of in a crossroads and a flux point, to be honest. I wanna say five years ago, six years ago, it was, you know, if HR doesn't change, ah, and then nothing happened. Now, after a pandemic, there's a lot of fatigue. That's happening with HR professionals and with staff in general. And it's interesting that a global crisis has to bring us to the forefront. My biggest concern is that HR stepped up. I don't want them to step back. Because it's too easy to go back into the same old patterns. It's too easy to go back into the, well this is how HRs supposed to be in our organization, instead of being more assertive and say, you thought people matter during a pandemic, they matter all the time. Therefore let's do this instead. But HR has to get out of the shadows to do that. Too often, It's well, if senior management says it's okay, I'll do it. Instead of saying, hey senior management, why don't we do it this way?

- I've heard, I'm sure everybody has heard the expression, you know, pushing a Boulder up the hill. And I've heard this recently when talked about HR, let's get out of that mindset of pushing the Boulder up the hill and maybe pushing the Boulder down the hill and have everybody chase us in the new direction. And I absolutely love that mentality because I think it completely switches our mindset in HR to think about our contribution less about, can I get a seat at the table and more like I'm at the table, am I contributing at the same level? Have you seen some of that shift too?

- In places I have. And I think those that are more self-assured, are jumping are jumping right into it. Because they're like, you don't have... you can't invite me anymore, I've been here. So that kind of stuff is cool. But that proactive approach, is a lot different than the long suffering approach people continue to do in HR. We have the, oh wow is me, oh I'm in HR. Oh, it's just this heavy sigh of death. You go, what the.... I wouldn't be in that profession. What are you

doing? So I like the idea of switching it, and to me it's how do you reframe what you do? So it's not that you forsake all the good things you've been doing. It's how do you reframe it? So that, are things people first and you can prove it. What happens if you put something in place, that really steps on top of somebody, how can you fix that? Be more agile, be more versatile. All the things that HR took on, during the pandemic, that were positive, that's what needs to go forward. And the big thing is proactive versus long suffering.

- What are some ways that you've been coaching people to make this transition? And I'll back up a little bit because I really loved what you said about, we stepped up to the plate and not falling back into some of our old ways. I was on a conversation today, just listening during a meeting, and some of that same old language started to surface again of like, well business wants it done this way or we don't really have a policy for that, kind of leaning back into so of those old ways. So how are you coaching people to think differently and build some of those different skills?

- When we were in the midst of everything, we had a big change here at LaRose's where we did curbside pickup. Curbside pickup is we bring your pizza out to your car. And a lot of the reason was to say, it's safe, here's your food. I'm not close to you. Everyone was kind of freaking out. We had been wanting to do curbside pickup for two years and couldn't do it. Everything got in the way. Every possible thing or another big area of work came up and we said, well, we'll get to it. Boom, pandemic hits crisis. Ah, our CEO was great. Love him. He took it my own, my flip chart. And I do, you can't see it right now. I work from a flip chart. He said, can I borrow this and your pen? I said, sure. So he took it down. He slams it on the table. He goes, I want curbside pickup today. The next day we had it.

- Wow

- Amazing.

- Right.

- I complimented him and I told him that what a great thing. And it proved out results, metrics, all those fun things. But it was, we needed activity instead of browsing about what isn't working or we don't have a policy or a procedure or a process, you know, crisis hit. So I told him this. I said, Isn't it cool that we bonded around a crisis? What if we did this all this time to perform instead? And he's like, oh, that's hurtful. So I think it's taking the situations you have in front of you and reframing and showing leadership and coaching them through. If this is the expectation you have, when we have a crisis, let's let make that our norm, let's be versatile, agile, responsive, meet the needs of our customers, now HR. And what I told him was we're making the pandemic A people issue. Every issue's a

people issue. And the way I said, I can prove this is this, I said, listen to a conversation. And by the fifth or sixth word, you're gonna hear someone's name. And he says, aww that's not true. Let's go. So we went out in the hall and someone said, where are we on that cheese delivery? Is Bo... There you go. And gosh, where's the call center at? I don't know. I need to talk to Carrie. Oh, oh. And so we keep making them the work situations. We have work issues, when there are people issues doing work. So my thing is, it's all about HR, everything there is. And I know I'm a little corny when I say that. But if it's, if you hear a person's name, that's what happens if I enable Bo or Carrie or put a person's name in there, to do their good work, then it gets things back. It's the cart and the horse in the right place.

- It sounds like you have a really great leadership team. That's open for that kind of conversation. I know some HR professionals don't have the same kind of support that you experience. What are some tips for them on how to have those conversations? Just like you had, right? And your leader responded, ingest, but some people might not be as gracious, in that response, but the facts still remain. You're absolutely right. It's about the talent. And it's about delivering really great results with the talent you have. So how do you have those conversations with your leadership team?

- First, you have to intentional and it's hard, because all the voices in our heads say, oh, if I go talk to Shari this is what's gonna happen. And she's gonna shut me down. I could lose my job and I can't lose my job. First of all, all I have to say, someone needs to be courageous. It should be HR. Because you're not doing this in spite of people, you're doing it for people. The second thing is this, frame the situation you see All I did with Michael was say, Hey, way to go. We don't encourage senior lenders. It's amazing to me, we do reports and audits and performance reviews, but we don't say, and you did good here. Or boy, you did something here that really concerned me. Do you know that when you did this, this affected the following 10 people? And the answer is that they don't. So it's not being critical. It's just framing things for them, in the context of a human lens, people first lens. I'll give you a good example. I have general managers who fight this tooth and nail. I'm gonna do you this. Hey Rob, this is what I'm hearing from your people. And I know it's eating at you. He goes, it is so what could we do together, to have this not eat you as much? And he goes, oh, and he has the ideas. He knows what to do. He just needs to know that he can have a safe place to talk about it, a safe place to challenge it, a safe place to get context about it. But the rule is, when I talk to you, we're moving forward. Not we're just gonna sit here and grouse. We're gonna get it out. And then we'll think of it together. A way to take it forward. I know this sounds awful and very self-serving and I don't mean it this way. Today I wrote a blog.

- Which we'll make sure we put the link in the share notes for you.

How about that?

- Called dump your bucket? So one of the things that we've put in place, the last year when we did a company reset, sure it's safe to dump your bucket with me. So it's a ground rule. So you can come in and go, ah and just let it out. No solutions, just make it safe. We're giving people the release they never had before. The pressure we're facing, the stress we're facing, that's fatigue we're facing. We keep complaining about it, instead of giving people a release valve. So if you do little things like that, give your leaders a release valve, make it safe and ask them how to move forward? Equip people more than measure people. So instead of focusing on here's all the things that Steve's not doing, what are the tools that Steve needs in order to do his job better? You can do these and you don't have to have this wonderful leadership team that I get to work with. It's just reframing it in how you approach those who are in leadership positions and do it differently.

- I absolutely love how you talked about having a place to, I'm gonna use the word vent, you said dump your bucket, which I absolutely love. I think that's a much better terminology, because so many times we have leaders, that will come in our room and do that. And immediately we go into solution solving mindset, right? Well, I can do this for you. I can do this. I can do this. I can do this. And we miss a couple opportunities. We miss, do they really need a solution to the problem in the moment? Or do they just need to get it off their chest? And two, are we really being a business partner in that moment? Or are we trying to solve it for them? Compared to your example, where you just opened up the door for the person to, they already had the ideas, they already knew the solutions. So we gotta do a better job of creating that environment, like you said, and allowing people that space to vent and to problem solve and to know they have a safe place to do that. I think that's missing a lot for sure.

- It is. And I think we're trying to make things already very programmatic. Hey, we need to focus on wellbeing. What's our wellbeing initiative and what's going on? Instead of saying, sharing, anytime you need to talk, I'm available, that's it. That's the whole program and everything's in bounds. So if you wanna come in and be colorful with your language, fine. If you want to come in and say, I really need to talk to you about something very sensitive and personal, fine. It should start with HR, but HR should in turn, teach those that lead others. You'll be a better leader, If you allow people to have that release valve and once they get it out, it just clears your head. Then you go, oh, that's not really the big issue. Here we go. But if you don't small things become big things quickly and we keep making these giant decisions on threads. It it's just a mess.

- Yeah. All right. I wanna switch gears a little bit, but still kind of stay in the vein of being successful in HR. We often find ourselves

having to get the basics right. To be able to move on to that next level. And I think a lot about that. Getting the basics right and being able to contribute in a more valuable way. As you think about the skillset that HR needs going forward for those coming into the profession now. It's different than the skillset I needed 15 years ago, coming into the profession. I'm not even gonna guess how long you've been HR. Because, I failed to look it up before we jumped on the call. But longer than that, our skills are different from when we started. For sure. What are the skills people need now? What are the things that they should be pushing themselves to learn? So that they can get the basics, right? But also they can provide this really strategic value that we have a really great opportunity to do, going forward.

- I just saw the head of scouting for the Bengals talk. I went to a vendor event and he was there. And one of the things he said on his team was, my scouting team needs to know football. Not, needs to know the positions. They need to know football. So if they recruit for a running back, they know what happens when that running back is playing. If they recruit for a defensive back, they know what happens. So instead of looking at the narrow side from a skill set, you have to look systematically. So when I look at this, when I add talent, what happens to that talent? Not just I have seven racks, I gotta get the racks filled. What do I do, you need to know that. But what happens when they get on board? Have a day two mentality, We get all excited that people come in the first day, lose our minds, have cake balloons. And the second day they're at work, I'll never talk to you again, until your annual performance review. And then I'll tell you all the things you're not doing well for the last year and one day. Stop it. Have a day two mentality and really value the people that are there. Get a mentor either internally or externally. You can't do HR on your own. Back when I started in HR, which was a little more than 15 years before you, we were taught to do everything on our own. It was a big mess, whatever that means, resources, blogs, podcasts, professional development, conferences. You need to have someone who's in your corner, who can be a mentor, not to tell you what to do, but be that support and give you direction and advice to get you the resources you need. And the last thing I would say is refuse to sit on the outside of the organization. Integrate what you do. You mentioned business partner earlier. I think it's funny that we changed one of our title to HR business partner, just because we're like doggone it, We're part of the business. And you need to see that. Instead of saying, I am a partner as I am the business. One of the things I talked about at SHRM this last year is we are the business. We don't have to learn the business. We are the business, because anywhere there's people, we're the business. It's that simple. So new people, I would say, I wanna learn about operations, so I can help you through your people. I wanna learn about finance, so I can help you through your people. Not that I wanna be a financial expert or an operations expert, but how does what I do, bring the talent you need, in order to make you succeed. So have

more of a business mentality going in.

- I really like the way you frame that, because I think we talk about knowing the business and I'm using air quotes here is one of those pillars that HR needs, but we don't frame it right. Right? You just said, okay, can I read a P&L statement? Can I, do I know the ins and outs? Okay, that's great. But unless you're able to connect those dots to talent and how you can influence it. You've missed the part about, why you need to know the why you need to know the business? I really appreciate that. As you've grown in your career, I'm curious how you've approached building your brand, both internally, where you work? And you've definitely done a great job of that. You've advanced in your own organization several times, but also externally. A lot of people know your name. They're excited to come see you at SHRM. But I think that comes with being very intentional on how on how you've built your brand. So I'd love to hear a little bit more about, how you went down that road?

- That's a good question. I don't know that it was as much of a conscious effort as I've heard other people try to present it. Because I believe being authentic and genuine. I'm a goof. I'm a tall geeky, goofy guy. I know that. I have faults and flaws just like everybody else, but I'm not going to be someone I'm not. I talk about people having an HR face and a real face or a business face and an HR face pick what wanna be. I don't, I am what I am. And now there's challenges with that because I'm not a good detail person. But I'll tell you, I'm a great idea person. Michael, our CEO said the most favorite thing. I keep it all the time with me. He says, you have a lot of ideas, and I like some of them. I'm like, all right. But what you talk about building your brand, is being who you are all the time. It's not a show, It's not a facade, It's just being yourself. But showing people, I have interest in you and others focused, I wanna share your good work. It's not about me. The more I focus on other people, the more people have said, I really want to connect with him. If I just say me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, it's a brand. And people do it all the time. It's short lived and you can't sustain it. I think there's so many more talented people than I will ever be. So hearing what they do, being connected to them, listening to who they are and amplifying what they do, I think is key. The other part is this. I believe in connecting with people, for years and years and years, I didn't. Because I was told you just didn't do that. Once I started doing it, I have a kind of natural knack for doing it is, I can't get enough people and it's not disingenuous. It's I wanna meet you. I wanna know you. I wanna know what you're about. I wanna know what you're doing. And when I see you the next time, I'm gonna know that, it's that important to me. I've done that internally for years. And then when I started to do it externally, it kind of caught people off guard, because most people externally want to share their wears or their service or their shick or whatever that is. I don't and I don't know that I can. Organizationally, I know this works. And when I teach

other people how to do this, I know it works because, then you see the real person behind it, Not the perceived picture of what you think they should be. Now, you fall down a lot. You laugh a lot. You know it's curious. I play around constantly. I'm a mess. One of my favorite things to say is, there's nothing in the law, that says you can't mess with people. So my thing is, we're messing with you. Because I want you to remember that the great human that you are. Too many people sharing, aren't valued, aren't seen or heard in our possession. I've always been the person. I don't want to think. Well, I'm the advocate and I'm the champion. No, I'm a person who was willing to put in the time to make it happen. Because that has value for you. That's awesome. But if it's, boy look at C. Brown, I'm out. I will run away. I can't put a lot of good words around it. When I'm at SHRM or events, I get flocked by people and I don't get it. I wanna spend all the time just getting to know you. And people are like, I just wanna meet you. I'm like, yeah, it's awesome. But if you meet me and you wanna take a picture or that kind of of very humbling stuff. When I ask you questions about you. Because I was taught that, if I focus on others, good things will happen. So it's what I do.

- It's all about authenticity in everything you've shared, right? There's this underlying note of be authentic. Be genuine. See people where they're at, give them opportunity to be themselves. I absolutely love that. I had a conversation with somebody the other day and they were talking about the fact that they're an introvert and the way they were talking about themselves, they were playing it down. And I stopped them. I said, Hey, I'm gonna stop you right there. I'm like, please don't be embarrassed about what I'm gonna say. But being an introvert is such a valuable talent. You see things I will never see as an extrovert. So don't ever put yourself down for being an introvert. It is such a unique skill that I will never have. And I could just see that this person had, they'd never heard that before, nobody had ever taken the time and I'm not tuning my own horn by any means. I'm just saying that there's an opportunity to be genuine and hear people. Like you said. You can find such success in that, if it's not about you.

- Right. And I love that example, Shari. I think it's perfect because, we tend to play down who we are and what we do. It's funny. When you look at HR, we talk about talent from a hiring perspective, but not a performance perspective. Because now you're hired. You're like, oh, they're just a worker. No, this is where they share their talents. This is where they share their strengths. So you're talented all the time, not just getting hired. So we need to shift our mindset to value the people for who they are and what they bring. Not focus on what they don't bring and don't do. Because it just... we was in a meeting this morning, before I got on here with you. I love having my user from now on that we focus so much on the vampires in our organization. Here are the people who are coming to just, oh God, oh, if I see Steve one more time and that's our entire day. Instead of saying, Hey Steve,

you're not going to do that to me anymore. What's going on? And just work through them and value them and, and lift them up. I think it's a great example.

- Well, Steve, this has been a great conversation. I have one more question before we wrap it up. And as you think about the future of HR, right? I don't know if there's a better term for that yet. I feel like there's something that should be more epic as you say that. What are you most excited about, what we're gonna be able to do in the near future here?

- I think companies really are understanding that if they're not people first, they're going to disappear. Those companies that embrace this, and this includes the big national or global brands or the local mom and pop shop. If you are not genuinely amplifying, elevating, equipping your talented people, it doesn't matter what you provide. It doesn't matter how costly you are. It doesn't matter how expeditious you are because the people today will not stay there anymore. In the past. They would. Now they're like, you know what? I'm not getting what I need. I'm going somewhere else. Or I will be seeing her valued. Given opportunity, asked for to be collaborative, asked to have input. If we don't as a profession, say that's where we need to have companies go and drive that from a leadership lens at a leadership seat. We're just mission a great opportunity, Because that's where it's going.

- Well, Steve, thanks for a few minutes of your time and such a great conversation today.

- Thanks so much Shari, always fun.

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